



WILLIAM PENTERMAN

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 37TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

(608) 237-9137
Toll-Free: (888) 534-0037
Rep.Penterman@legis.wisconsin.gov

P.O. Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708-8953

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Assembly Committee on Education

Testimony from Rep. William Penterman in favor of AB 138

Thank you, Chairman Kitchens, for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 138, and thank you to members of the committee for taking the time to hear my testimony.

Obtaining a High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) or General Educational Development certificate (GED) is an important step in an individual's personal growth and professional credentialing. It opens the door to numerous job possibilities, pay raises, and other benefits.

Unfortunately, many Wisconsinites do not receive their HSED or GED from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction in a timely manner. Currently, individuals wait an average of 4-6 weeks to get their GED. DPI's credentialing system is outdated and has not been developed beyond the paper-based system of processing credentials. 39 states either have their own online system for individuals to request their GED or HSED or contract out to a provider to get these credentials processed.

AB 138 will require the Department of Public Instruction to set up an online site similar to what is done in the rest of the country. Wisconsin currently has an unemployment rate of 2.5% with employers struggling to fill open positions. We need to do everything possible to address our workforce shortage in Wisconsin and this legislation will help get folks into the workforce sooner.

Thank you for your time and consideration of Assembly Bill 138. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



AB 138: Issuing a Declaration of Equivalency of High School Graduation

Testimony of Senator Steve Nass
Assembly Committee on Education
July 20, 2023 • 417 North, State Capitol

Thank you Chairman and committee members for allowing me to provide testimony in support of AB 138. This bill would speed up the process for a person who completes the requirements to obtain a high school equivalency diploma (HSED) or general educational development certificate (GED) to receive that documentation more quickly and efficiently from the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). The bill does **not** change or lessen any of the educational requirements for a HSED or GED.

Obtaining a HSED or GED is an important step in an individual's professional credentialing, career development, and personal growth. It opens the door to increased job possibilities, promotions, pay raises, and other benefits.

It has been brought to our attention, however, that many Wisconsinites who complete the process are not receiving their HSED or GED certificates from DPI in a timely manner compared to other states. Currently, applicants who have completed their educational requirements wait an average of 4-6 weeks to get their GED certificate from the department.

DPI's credentialing system is outdated and does not take advantage of modern technologies to speed up the process for applicants. Their current system for processing credentials is solely paper-based, which leaves applicants waiting longer than necessary to apply the benefits of their earned HSED or GED.

39 other states either have their own online system for individuals to request their GED or HSED or contract with a provider to process these credentials. This bill requires DPI to provide an online option similar to what is already done in the vast majority of other states, to help expedite this credentialing process for our citizens.

Wisconsin currently has an unemployment rate of 3.2%, with employers of all kinds struggling to fill open positions with qualified workers. This bill will also help to address

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Toll Free: (800) 578-1457 • E-mail: Sen.Nass@legis.wi.gov

our workforce shortage by helping to get employees into the workforce sooner, without having to wait multiple weeks to receive a necessary certification.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of AB 138. Please contact my office with any further questions committee members have on this legislation.



July 20, 2023

Assembly Committee on Education

**Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2023 Assembly Bill 138**

I want to thank Chairman Kitchens and members of the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on Assembly Bill 138 (AB 138). My name is Kevyn Radcliffe, Legislative Liaison for the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and with me today is Lucas Munz, DPI's Chief Information Officer.

DPI opposes AB 138.

DPI opposes AB 138 as unnecessary because we are already working on a GED/HSED reporting system that will fulfill the intent of the bill while providing for a more robust, user-friendly public portal. Further, the portion of the project that will provide for public-facing lookup and verification portal is on track to be completed by the end of this year.

The state superintendent of public instruction is authorized to issue high school equivalency diplomas (HSED) and general education development (GED) certificates to individuals who have completed the requirements for an HSED or GED. The funding for this program is entirely based on fees and DPI has **not been appropriated additional funding** for the for the purpose of implementing the GED/HSED program. DPI supplements program fee revenues out of our agency operations budget. DPI has a single FTE and a partial position to process over 3,500 GED/HSED new credentials per year, and even more transcript, diploma, and verification requests. We recognize that those seeking a GED or HSED are disproportionately low-income people, and as such we have resisted pursuing increased fees as a revenue source to avoid creating a barrier to obtaining these credentials.

The department's GED/HSED credentialing system was developed many years ago, and until very recently staff have been largely dependent on a paper-based system of credential record keeping and issuance. We have been painfully aware of GED/HSED credential issuance delays. However, funding limitations have prevented us from modernizing this program prior to now.

All of that is about to change. Governor Evers allocated funding in November of 2022 from the Governor's discretionary Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) to support the work of moving from an antiquated paper system to a stream-lined digitalized process for storing, accessing, and processing GED/HSED requests from candidates, employers, and educators. This one-time funding was vital to engaging LTE staff and services to digitize and verify existing records and build a public-facing application to make GED/HSED records more accessible. These funds must be expended by June 30, 2024. No additional funding has been allocated to this initiative. We will

be requesting funds in our 2025-26 budget request for on-going costs to update and maintain the system into the future.

To be clear, this new system may not eliminate all delays in GED/HSED issuance. Many factors are outside of DPI's control. For example, GED/HSED credentials are not always immediately available even to DPI. Sometimes testing centers, community-based organizations, or corrections facilities withhold records until the individual who took the test pays for their class, tutoring, test fees, etc. This project will go a long way in improving GED/HSED credential issuance times through digitization and automation.

We have several concerns with this bill, but rather than addressing those concerns individually, we would rather describe the exciting changes coming to DPI. And now, I will turn things over to Lucas to talk about the details of our modernization project.

As Kevyn alluded to, DPI's vision for this application is multi-faceted and focuses on digitizing nearly all aspects of credentialing and verification for past and future GED/HSED recipients. We want to ensure that, be it an application to an institution of higher education, technical education, an apprenticeship, or employer verification, that all recipients, **past or future**, will feel supported through efficient processes and an easy to navigate public-facing portal.

In support of this vision, and with the CRF funds, we've built a database to collect all new credentials and a backend application for staff to quickly lookup and verify any of the roughly 3,500 new credentials that are issued each year. We are actively digitizing and transcribing the nearly 150,000 paper records at a pace of about 15,000 per week into that database and expect to finish in September.

We have already transitioned test centers to an online form to submit test results to DPI in place of what was essentially oversized index cards (paper records). This means that for recent credentials or those that are being digitized and transcribed, about 15,000 additional per week, we no longer need to do the tedious and time-consuming task of first locating paper records for verification requests, transcript requests, or diploma requests.

All of this is foundational to developing a meaningful real-time public-facing portal that, barring a shift to align with this bill, we are targeting to release by the end of this year and will allow employers or 3rd-parties direct lookup/verification capabilities through information provided by a recipient, and allow **past and future recipients** to see core credential information and simplify ordering of certified credential copies for higher education, technical education, apprenticeship programs, other uses.

Beyond 2023 and until CRF funding is depleted in June 2024, we will look to feedback from recipients and test centers to identify areas for enhancement or additional features that may include things like a MyWisconsinID integration for full transcript access by recipients or further simplifying the ordering process for diplomas and certified transcripts or automating batch printing and mailing for new diplomas or certified transcripts, or any number of other features as funding allows.

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As an interim step while we build out the portal, we've expanded our website to allow recipients paperless ordering of transcripts and replacement diplomas and added capabilities for paperless employer and 3rd-party verification requests as well.

In closing, DPI opposes this bill because we are already in the process of creating a credential database system and public-facing portal. Developing such a system is not a simple task as is implied by this bill. Rather, there are a myriad of policy and technical determinations that must be made along the way. This IT service (portal), like other IT services, should be allowed the flexibility to adapt based on privacy laws, industry changes, feedback from program staff, GED/HSED recipients, testing centers, and those seeking verification, without the limitations of this bill. Now and into the future, DPI should be allowed to determine how best to provide credentials and verifications in an efficient and secure manner for the benefit recipients, employers, higher educational institutions, technical programs, apprenticeships, and others.

Kevyn and I are happy to answer any questions.

If you have questions or would like additional information, please contact Kevyn Radcliffe, Legislative Liaison, at kevyn.radcliffe@dpi.wi.gov or (608) 264-6716.